

“Do not look down on us”: child researchers investigate informal settlements in Zimbabwe

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Chris McIvor

Background to the project

A 1995 study of Harare's urban population revealed that some 110,000 people (10 per cent of the city's total) were living in informal settlements (Auret, 1995). Increasing rural poverty, overcrowded communal farming areas and high youth unemployment continue to fuel a major exodus from country to city. Combined with Harare's natural population increase, it is now estimated that the capital of Zimbabwe is experiencing a growth rate of some 12 per cent per year.

Many of these people now live in informal settlements, sometimes labelled by the government as “temporary holding camps”. The “temporary” nature of these communities means that both local and national governments are reluctant to invest in social services. Housing, health care, education provision, waste disposal, water and sanitation facilities are among the worst in the country. This in turn has resulted in high mortality rates, low education enrolment, and high levels of crime and prostitution. Referring to informal peri-urban settlements around Harare in 1997, the Minister for Health stated:

It is as if Porta Farm, Dzivarasekwa and Hatcliffe are dumping grounds, without serious thought given to the consequences of allowing such vast numbers of people in these areas. These communities are the biggest scar on the public health landscape.

Municipal authorities contend that any substantial investment in informal communities only attracts more residents and is a waste of resources due to their impermanent nature. Nevertheless the fact remains that for thousands of children living in these locations, their rights to survival, development and protection are severely infringed. Concern over the plight of children in these communities prompted Save The Children (U.K.) and a local partner organization (Inter Country People's Aid) in 1998 to carry out a situation analysis in two informal settlements, Porta Farm and Dzivarasekwa Extension. It was felt that there was insufficient information to ensure that assistance programmes in these communities were adequately targeting people's real needs. The objective of the study was to answer some of these questions.

On completion of the study, some useful quantitative information had been gathered, relating to subjects such as population numbers, availability of services, and average levels of income. Yet comments relayed from the community by several of the adult researchers prompted us to question both the methodology and the results of the investigation. In particular,



Young boy at Porta Farm

many of the children in focus group discussions had complained that they were not given enough time to explain the gravity of their situation. They were also concerned about the ways in which information was collected, leaving little opportunity to review, analyse and challenge the findings from a group of researchers who were external to the community. They also claimed that, given the objectives of the study, namely to explore the living conditions of young people in informal urban settlements, their voices were marginalised and that adults who spoke on their behalf were often ignorant about their real situation, perceptions and wishes.

A new research project

These criticisms prompted Save The Children to devise a more extensive and participatory project, where the principal researchers would be children themselves from informal settlements. It was felt that this kind of research would not only yield more comprehensive and qualitative information for both programming and advocacy purposes, but that the process itself would also be important in terms of encouraging children to better analyse and understand their own situation.

The research team was set up in August 1998, drawing children from both Porta Farm and Dzivarasekwa settlements. Some 38 children, an equal mix of boys and girls, were selected for a preparatory workshop through the mediation of two schools in the above communities.

While it was felt important that the child researchers should have reasonable levels of literacy in order to be able to record their findings, the Save the Children project coordinators and the selected children were clear that this stipulation should not mean the exclusion of out-of-school and other disadvantaged youths. These were included in the target list of key informants.

The project was received by the children in these locations with considerable enthusiasm. There was more demand from children to be included in the research exercise than the number of places available. One of the interesting features about the preparatory workshop was the way in which children approached discussions about the proposed research tools. They eagerly contributed their ideas and suggestions as to how these could be modified to more adequately meet the conditions in the community, and what would be more acceptable and stimulating for their peers.

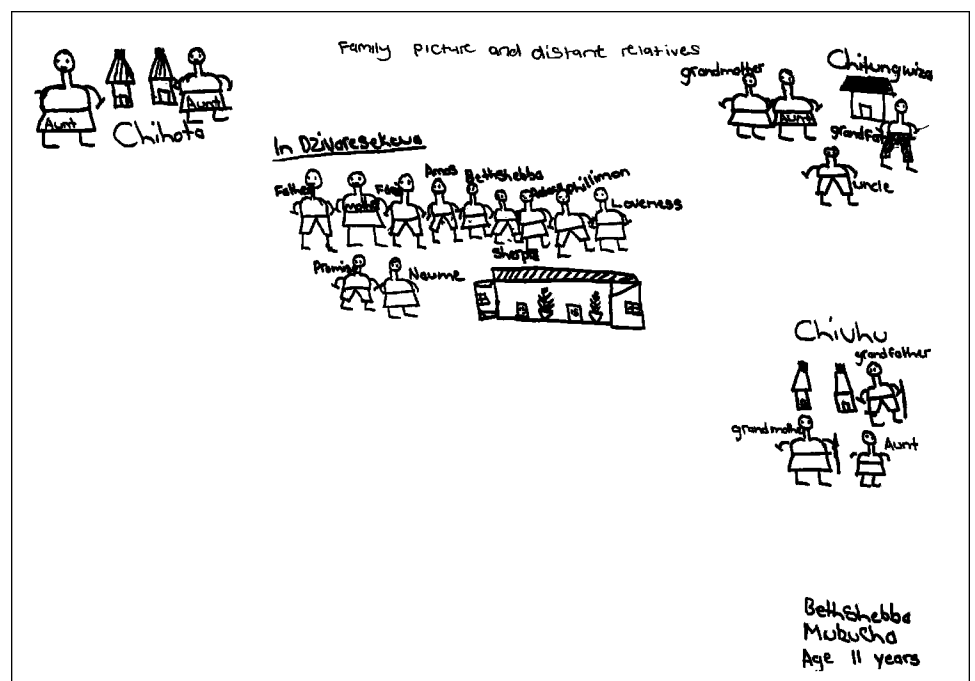
This was evident, for example, in a stone piling exercise used by the researchers with other children to establish priority problems they faced in their communities. Instead of heaping more stones on a big problem (the method proposed by the adult trainers), they felt that different sizes of stone were more accurate in reflecting the gravity of different issues. The adaptation of methods throughout the project provided us with a clear indication that the children saw the research not as a slavish replication of certain tools, but a set of procedures to be utilised, changed and adapted as circumstances dictated. The perception of participatory methods as a means to solicit qualitative, useful information was highlighted by one 17 year old researcher, who claimed:

Through this project I learnt how to handle and work with children. I also learnt how to get along with them. I got to know the various research techniques, for example, the use of dramas and plays to draw out issues and to loosen people up during the interviews. These techniques made the research process easier for us. The plays were on social and community issues. They were performed by children. Sometimes we had to talk about our own problems as a way of getting people to speak to us.

As the project progressed, the original team of 38 children reduced to a core group of 10 researchers in Dzivarasekwa and 15 in Porta Farm. The others dropped out for a variety of reasons, often to do with heavy domestic chores and their need to generate family income, which compromised the amount of time they could devote to the project. Arising from the children's observations, the adult facilitators also adopted a flexible timetable to accommodate other commitments. This included exams during the research period, the need to deal with initial community scepticism, further training arising from observations of test interviews, and a family workload that was in excess of what we had envisaged at the start of the project for many of the children selected for the research.

The actual study carried out by the children took place over a four-month period from September to December 1998. Combined with the preparatory work beforehand, the subsequent processing and revision of information, the collation of all data, and the editing, design and layout of the final publication, the entire process lasted over a year. The final result was an 80-page book entitled *Do Not Look Down On Us*, which was launched in Zimbabwe in mid-1999 (Chinyenze-Daniel, Mclvor & Honeyman, 1999). This document has been used: (1) to help create a network of organisations working in informal settlements; (2) for purposes of identifying programmes of assistance based on problems identified by children in the research; (3) as an advocacy tool to raise

Figure 1 This picture shows the extended family of one child in Dzivarasekwa Extension, and the distances from the immediate family to the nearest relatives. Many children in informal settlements complain that they lose contact with their relatives, because their extended family members live in rural areas and their poverty means that they cannot visit them.



the profile of this community within government, local government and the wider public; and (4) as a mechanism for promoting the realisation that children can effectively participate in research and project implementation if given adult permission, training and support to do so.

Obstacles and difficulties

Originally the coordinators envisaged that the research to be carried out by children would probably require one month to complete. In the end it took four times as long. This arose from the need to negotiate a variety of constraints and obstacles that had not been foreseen prior to implementation.

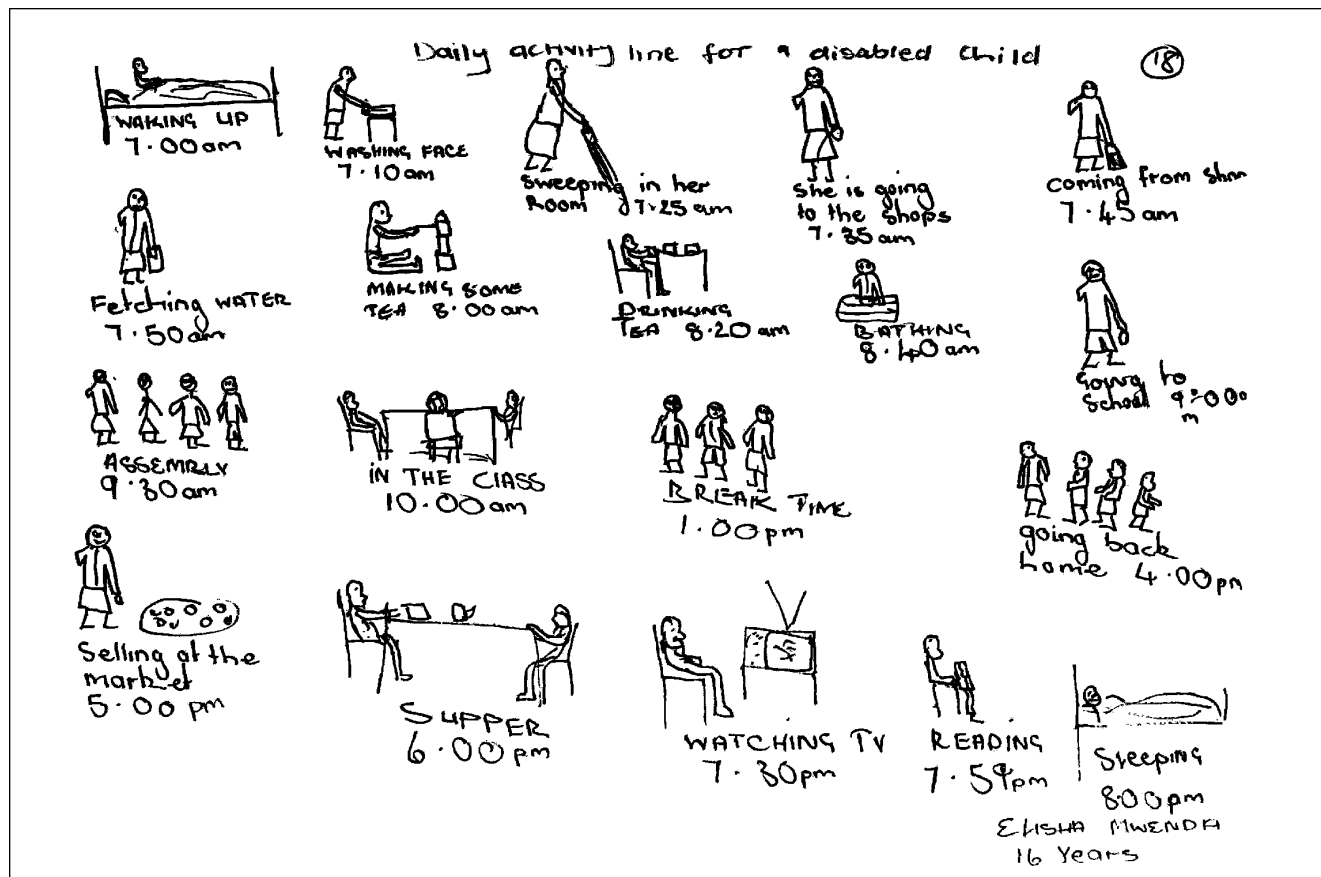
There was considerable adult suspicion as to the nature of the research and why children were being asked to conduct it. Several parents, for example, objected to the involvement of their children, citing domestic and other chores as key activities that could only be compromised at the cost of the family's survival. The question then arose of payment for the researchers, as compensation for lost time, but after discussion it was felt that this might affect the quality of the research and lead to resentment among other children excluded from the process. In the end the project coordinators arrived at an acceptable timetable with parents and children, although this meant that the original deadline had to be delayed by several months.

Several parents and other adults in the community were also sceptical about the rationale for the research in the first place. They pointed out that other organisations in the past had carried out studies in informal settlements, but they had seen very little tangible assistance as a result. Members of the two communities had been particularly perturbed by what they saw as a culture of discrimination in the local media, whereby they were referred to as "squatters" and accused of criminal activities and prostitution. They wondered whether the project with children would end up prying into their private lives and fuel further prejudice against them.

To meet these objections the coordinators of the project, members of the development committees and the children themselves, convened several public meetings where they sought to explain that the first step in devising appropriate and long-term solutions to the problems in informal settlements was to understand the true nature of the difficulties that people face. They pointed out that they all had experience of projects which had failed because of limited and flawed consultation with community residents. From an initial situation of some community hostility, the child researchers noted a definite change as their research progressed. One 16 year old wrote:

We were given research to do, which involved us asking groups of people questions relating to their

Figure 2 Daily activity line for a disabled child, drawn by one of the child researchers at Porta Farm



situation. We found these groups at soccer matches and at the market place. Through the research, people were expected to identify the problems they are facing and to find solutions to them. Initially people looked down on us, forcing some researchers to withdraw. But after a while many of them appreciated the whole idea and provided us with the information we needed.

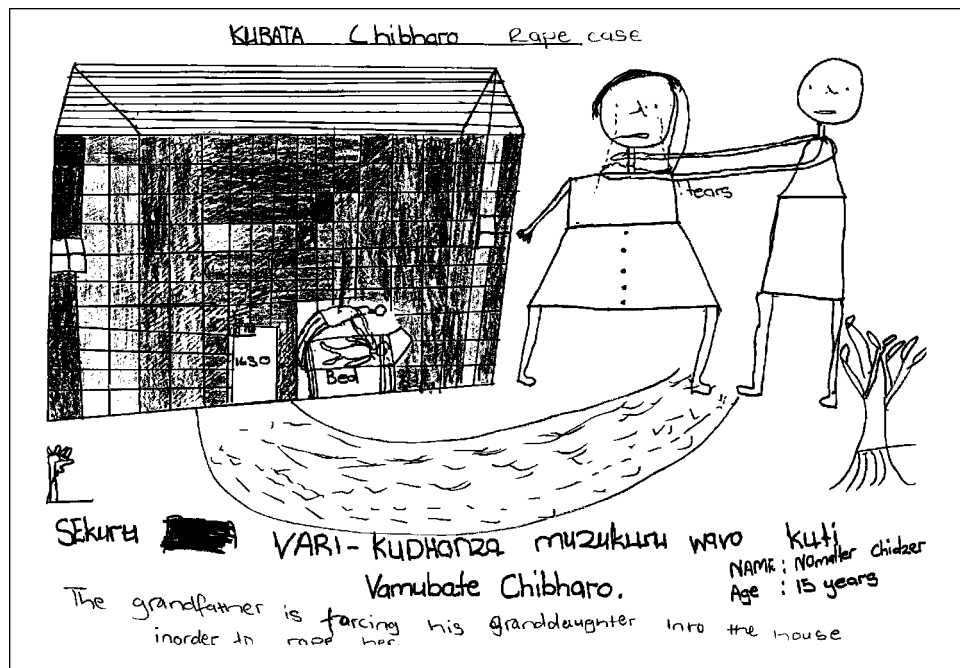
Another problem that arose during the project was the issue of confidentiality and how the researchers should deal with extremely sensitive information. The process of engaging in discussions with children, many of whom had never had the opportunity to confide in anyone else, led to several instances where physical and sexual abuse was strongly indicated. One youth researcher came up with the following information, during a focus group discussion with other children:

We are physically and mentally abused by our stepmothers. They always accuse us of something we have not done. If anything is missing at home, we are always blamed. Some of us girls are given men, whom we do not want. If the men we are given become broke, our stepmothers usually look for another man with money. Some children are abused by stepfathers, while their mothers are away.

During the orientation process, and on subsequent supervisory visits when the researchers indicated a high percentage of cases of abuse in the community, the children were given guidelines on the issue of confidentiality. If information were divulged to them of this nature it was not to be discussed with other members of the group or in a public forum but was to be communicated to the adult coordinators, who would then decide the most appropriate response. It was pointed out that if such information became public, and in the absence of a clearly defined counselling, referral and legal service, a child who reports abuse could be placed in an even worse situation.

As a result of information gathered during the course of the project, the adult coordinators strengthened ties with the appropriate child welfare and protection department of the Ministry of Social Welfare. Yet it needs to be stated

Figure 3 Several children highlighted the fact that sexual abuse of minors, especially by family members or friends, was quite common. This drawing from Porta Farm was done by one child respondent, who had heard of such an event in her community.



that for children in such a situation, living in communities of this nature, an absence of resources, inadequate staff, and a shortage of referral locations and safe houses effectively mean that very little support is available to them for protection and remedy against abusive situations. A major recommendation arising from the research is to improve the availability and quality of child protection services in informal settlements, as well as to conduct a campaign within these locations to look at community responses to this particular problem.

Conclusion and lessons learned

Many children in Zimbabwe, especially those in marginalised urban and rural areas, are given responsibility for a whole range of activities within their communities. In informal settlements, for example, children indicated that they are often responsible for water and fuel wood collection, agricultural work, family income generating activities, disposal of garbage, child rearing, domestic chores and housing construction. No matter whether we think these activities are appropriate or not for children, the fact is that they are part of young people's lives in many parts of the world. If we wish to assist them, therefore, it makes no sense to exclude them from discussions as to how best this might be done.

Yet involving children in a meaningful debate, as opposed to much of the tokenistic consultation that currently takes place, is a process which is new for many organisations. Through the course of this research in informal settlements, we learned many lessons that have helped to

inform our subsequent interaction with children in other projects in Zimbabwe. These lessons were derived both from children's comments on the research methodology and process, as well as feedback and observations from the programme's adult coordinators and project managers. Some of the principal issues we had to deal with included the following:

- Several of the youth researchers indicated that interacting with younger children proved difficult. In group discussions younger children were often silent, intimidated by the presence of their older peers. Sometimes they seemed to find the wording of questions too complex and intimidating. In the end the researchers had to "learn the language" of younger children, and devise methods to encourage them to communicate. This resulted in the considerable use of visual documentation. Some of the more salient findings of the project were communicated through drawings by younger children, especially when they were presenting situations of considerable concern and personal difficulty.
- The research findings clearly indicated that life for many children in informal settlements is harsh and difficult, and they face a considerable range of responsibilities we normally associate with adulthood. If we expect them to trade these often hard routines in order to provide us with information, the research process itself has to have an element of fun and enjoyment. Methodologies that are stimulating, interactive, and punctuated with games are more likely to attract large groups of child respondents and promote a meaningful discussion. As children in informal settlements strongly indicated, their rights to recreation are too often infringed. Any attempt to involve them either in research or project implementation needs to recognize this fact and incorporate this dimension as part of any activities.
- Many of the children pointed out that they had never been consulted before. For them the project provided an opportunity to speak out, to raise their concerns in a way that school and family had often denied them. Yet this raises challenges for any project that offers children such an opportunity. It awakens a capacity and need that subsequently requires other outlets. At the end of the project many of the youth researchers asked us: "What next? What more do you have for us to do?". Partly because of our commitment to an educational programme in these communities, we were able to channel this enthusiasm and energy into other activities. Some of the children, for example, formed a drama group in their school, and with some support from Save the Children have performed in other informal settlements around Harare. The lesson here is that participatory research with children creates a new

set of skills and expectations that demand expression. Organisations that start this process have an obligation to see it continue.

- As mentioned elsewhere, the adult coordinators originally assumed that children had sufficient time after school to carry out the research. Any project with children in poorer communities, however, needs to realise that children face major constraints and will have to devise mechanisms to deal with those. Inability to appreciate the workload of children will give rise to conflict. Broken deadlines, failure to complete set tasks in time were initially blamed on the "laziness" of the researchers or their inability to carry out assignments. It was only during subsequent discussions that the full range of children's commitments to economic survival were appreciated.
- Perhaps one of the most rewarding aspects of the project, and one not entirely envisaged at the start, was the development within the researchers of a level of confidence and self-esteem that much of their previous experience had denied them. According to the children, the research process was an enriching experience for them. It allowed them to develop a range of skills in writing, drawing, analysing, communicating and listening. But more importantly, it led to a growth of confidence and self-esteem that several parents and teachers commented upon. In a country where child rights has often been seen as an invitation to unruly behaviour, the growth in responsibility and self-confidence that can come to children through participation is invaluable in challenging sceptical parental attitudes. As one of the researchers from Porta Farm wrote:

I learned about the research process and about the ways in which research is conducted. We moved around Porta Farm with a questionnaire and asked people to respond to each question. Although some people were difficult at first, once they found out about the project they responded very well. This was an enriching experience for me, which made me realise that there is a lot that I as an individual can do.

**Chris Mclvor, Save the Children Fund (U.K.),
P.O. Box 4689, Harare, Zimbabwe
chrism@scfuk.org.zw**

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